

Book offers good introduction to Merton

Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story, by Msgr. William H. Shannon; Crossroad (New York, 1992); 304 pages; \$22.95.

By Christine M. Bochen
Guest contributor

Silent Lamp's author needs no introduction to *Catholic Courier* readers. Monsignor William H. Shannon is well-known as a teacher, lecturer, retreat master and writer.

His recent publications on prayer, *Seeking the Face of God* and *Silence on Fire*, have been highly praised and widely read. Both books testify to the profound influence Thomas Merton has had on Monsignor Shannon's own understanding of prayer, non-violence, and social justice.

In *Silent Lamp*, Monsignor Shannon focuses his attention on Thomas Merton (1915-1968), the Trappist monk, writer and social critic — who is like "a lamp lighting the way for many." The lamp metaphor is derived from

the name given Merton by his friend, the Chinese Philosopher, John Wu. "Silent Lamp," Wu wrote, was Merton's name in Chinese.

The priest-author chooses to tell the Merton story "in terms of significant years, events and experiences" and so he writes what he calls a "reflective biography."

The book is a "reflective biography" in three ways:

- First, as Monsignor Shannon himself suggests, "it attempts to look at the inner journey that alone gives meaning to the exterior one." By focusing on formative moments and times of conversion, insight and deepening consciousness throughout Merton's life, Monsignor Shannon avoids the tedium of merely narrating events. This can leave a reader overwhelmed with detail and left with the mistaken impression that life is merely a passage of time;

- Second, it is the product of Monsignor Shannon's deep reflection, care-

ful study and solid scholarship;

- Third, the biography invites us to reflect on the significance of Merton's life and thought and on the relevance of Merton's story to our own.

To aid the reader, the author employs a helpful device: a series of chronologies, sprinkled throughout the book, that lay out facts of Merton's life — the names, dates, events, writings that are key to Merton's story — as well as the context for all his life (national and world events, happenings in the church, important publications).

His including the chronologies seems especially appropriate since so much of the monk's story is lived in response to the world in which the monk found himself. As Merton himself observed: "That I should have been born in 1915, that I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Viet Nam and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved." (*Contemplation in a World of Action.*)

Illustrations — eight in all — also serve to draw the reader into Merton's world. Most are photographs taken by Monsignor Shannon of places so important to Merton's story. One of the photographs shows a painting by Merton's father, Owen, depicting a French village and giving us a glimpse of the countryside that left a deep impression on the young Merton.

I was grateful to Merton for his insight and words that could have been written today and grateful to Monsignor Shannon for providing critical reflection on Merton's thought on the issue.

This made me realize how wide an audience to which *Silent Lamp* appeals. To someone like myself, a longtime reader of Merton, Monsignor Shannon offers helpful integration, challenging critique, and handy reference. I am sure that others who have read books by and about Merton will be as delighted with it as I am.

But I am also happy to have a book to suggest to those who ask "Where do I start reading Merton? The man has written so much!" From now on my answer to that question will be: "Start with Shannon's *Silent Lamp*! It is the best introduction to Merton! There you will discover what of Merton's own writings you want to read next."

Dr. Bochen is professor of religious studies at Nazareth College of Rochester and secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society.



Ron Bartzdorff-20th Century Fox
Madeleine Stowe and Kurt Russell portray a young couple who become involved with a menacing policeman in *Unlawful Entry*.

Plot keeps film from breaking any new ground

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Aimed at the lucrative *Fatal Attraction* crowd is *Unlawful Entry* (20th Century Fox), which basically repeats the gory story but switches the sexes.

This time around it is the single male who is out to have the married woman, no matter who he has to kill to get her.

At first Karen (Madeleine Stowe) and Michael Carr (Kurt Russell) are grateful for Officer Pete Davis' (Ray Liotta) special attention and security advice after a burglar in their home nearly slit Karen's throat.

Michael, however, short-circuits their friendship when he sees Pete in action on the job, beating a suspect to a bloody pulp. Enraged by Michael's rebuff and drawn to his wife, the cop frames him on a drug felony charge and Michael is jailed.

Jonathan Kaplan directs a transparent story geared to set up a bloodthirsty ending that justifies murder.

Liotta may give a solid performance, but his character is so clearly psychotic that Stowe's innocent attraction to him doesn't wash.

The predictable plot offers no real insight into the cop's sick behavior. It's simply a case of cheap thrills appealing to base instincts. A better instinct would be to skip this *Fatal Attraction* clone.

Because of several sexual encounters with nudity, recurring violence and much rough language, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is O — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

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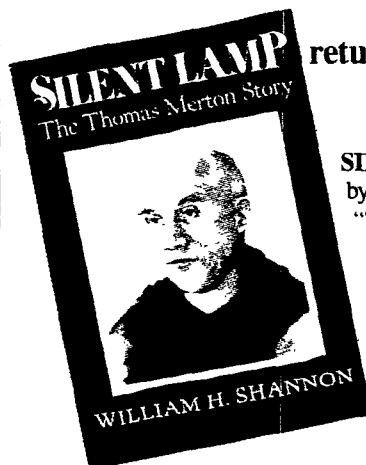
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